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ABSTRACT

What pushes a writer over the edge of thought into text production--over what may be called "the writing threshold?" This is the moment when the thoughts in a writer's mind, the writing situation, and personal motivations create a momentum that results in a pattern of written words. There is evidence that not everyone crosses the writing threshold in the same way. Some writers do extensive composing (and even revising) mentally before putting words on paper, while others write down words almost as they are thought. A writer may find crossing the threshold more difficult when material is less well understood. The writing threshold functions like a membrane between the ideas in the writer's head and the flow of words onto the page. "Precipitating states" (which include deadline anxiety, conscious intent, and creative flow) result in the crossing of the membrane or threshold. In the classroom, the concept of the writing threshold gives identity to a critically individual but largely ignored part of the writing process. Students' realizations that there are different ways of crossing the threshold will help de-mystify the writing process, and may help make that moment of text production less mysterious and more approachable. (SG)

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Crossing the Writing Threshold

Carol Lea Clark

Writing--putting pen to paper or fingers to the keyboard--is never really easy. Even at the best of times, with inspired ideas focused in the mind's eye, there is always the nagging complication of having to translate those thoughts into words on pages of paper. Sometimes and for some people the writing comes more easily than for others. Calvin Trillin reflects, "Sometimes--when I am very lucky--the story just opens up before me and I realize which direction to go in" (11-12). Another writer, Donald M. Murray, says of his alter ego "Morison" on one of his less fluent days, "He clears writing time on his schedule, shuts the door . . . and watches a tree grow . . . he makes neat work plans . . . and doesn't follow them" (219). One of my students voices the same reality: "Sometimes I can sit down and write right off the top of my head. Yet, at other times I sit down and can't think of a single word."

Ideas may come with ease or with difficulty; but in the

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final analysis, ideas aren't writing until they become written words. All the intricate plots waking writers in the middle of the night don't become short stories unless they are written down. Term papers written word-by-painful word don't become term papers until those painful words are on paper or on the computer screen. No matter how extensive the preparation, how well thought out the ideas, the flow of words must begin at some point or the writing can happen not at all. What brings a writer to that critical point of generating words, whether the words come with ease or with difficulty? What pushes a writer over the edge of thought into text production?

The Writing Threshold

Stephen Witte, Muriel Harris, Carol Berkenkotter, Sondra Perl and others have studied the writing process. Though none of them specifically identifies a point when thoughts become text, their work shows indications of its existence. I propose a new term, "the writing threshold," for this moment when, with a sense of ease or difficulty, the thoughts in a writer's mind, the writing situation, and personal motivations create a momentum that results in words formed in a pattern on a page of paper or on a computer screen. This threshold is crossed when an individual first begins a piece of writing, and it is also crossed over and over again each time he or she pauses in the act of writing to reflect, edit, or mentally compose before continuing to write.

Stephen Witte analyzes the mental composition of words prior to writing and uses the term "pre-text" to refer to "a writer's linguistic representation of intended meaning, a 'trial locution' that is produced in the mind, stored in the writer's memory, and sometimes manipulated mentally prior to being transcribed as written text" (397). Some writers use pre-text extensively, even revising what they have composed mentally before putting words on paper. Others make little use of pre-text, writing down words almost as they are thought.

The "writing threshold" meshes with "pre-text" at the moment at which words are put on paper or on a computer screen. So, a writer who makes extensive use of pre-text would likely have a more polished composition at the point of crossing the writing threshold. Another writer who crosses the writing threshold earlier in the writing process, writing down unedited thoughts, may revise after the written words have been made visible.

Muriel Harris also offers evidence that everyone does not cross the writing threshold in the same way. She finds that accomplished one-draft writers feel a strong need to clarify their thinking prior to beginning to write. In contrast, equally successful multi-drafters resist any attempt at clarification prior to writing. They prefer open-ended exploration as they write (181).

A writer, comfortable with one stage of pre-text before writing, may find the process of crossing the writing threshold breaks down when material is less well understood. Carol

Berkenkotter, in her analysis of Donald Murray's composing aloud protocols, describes him as writing with great fluency and ease when he is thoroughly familiar with a subject. But when he is writing about new ideas, his pace slows and his voice becomes halting; often his drafting process breaks down, forcing him to return to his notes before writing again (168). When he is unsure of the direction of his writing, Murray is unable to keep going the process of crossing the writing threshold, and he needs to regroup before continuing.

Sondra Perl quotes Anne, a writer she studied, as saying: "I almost never move from the writing of one 2sentence directly to the next . . . I often have to read the several preceding sentences a few times as if to gain momentum to carry me to the next sentence" (115). Perl claims that writers decide to write after they have a "dawning awareness that something has clicked" (115). This awareness of a "click" gives "momentum" which writers use to carry them across the writing threshold. Perl uses the term "felt sense," which is a "very careful attention to one's inner reflections" (116), to describe this "click" experience. She comments that many writers are not aware of a "felt sense," though they use it to direct their production of words.

Writers may also be unaware of a barrier, a writing threshold, they must cross before words can be produced. I propose that the writing threshold functions like a membrane between the mass of ideas in a writer's head and the flow of words onto a page. A precipitating state (such as creative flow,

discussed below) results in the crossing of the membrane or threshold.

Precipitating States for Crossing the Writing Threshold

In my analysis of the literature relating to the writing process, I have tentatively identified three precipitating states that result in crossing the writing threshold:

1. Deadline Anxiety--Cynthia L. Selfe constructs an in-depth case study of Bev, an eighteen-year-old student diagnosed as an apprehensive writer. Bev has made procrastination a part of her writing process, saying "Pressure is definitely a big factor in my writing. I get an assignment, stick it away, and mark the [due] date on my calendar" (85). And only on the day before the assignment was due does the pressure of the deadline overcome her fear of writing. She gets the assignment over as quickly as possible so that she has to stay in an anxiety state as short a time as possible.

Muriel Harris explores the composing process differences between experienced one- and multi-draft writers. She finds that one-drafters describe themselves as "incurable procrastinators who begin even long papers the night before . . . while they worry about whether they will finish on time, these one-drafters generally do" (182). The one-drafters she studied were accomplished writers and didn't complain of painful anxiety, like Selfe's student Bev. Rather, Harris' subjects knew their own abilities and simply put off writing until deadline pressure was

critical; they still allowed themselves time to complete assignments competently. But, of course, all teachers are familiar with less accomplished one-drafters who procrastinate until they are incapacitated by anxiety and cannot produce required text before deadline.

2. Conscious intent--Irving Wallace, like many other prolific writers, established his own program of writing every day whether he felt like it or not. Wallace explains why:

> Once, long ago, deceived by the instructors, professors, by an old romantic tradition, I had believed that a writer writes only when he feels like it, only when he is touched by mystic inspiration. But then, I realized that most successful writers invest their work with professionalism. (qtd. in Pear 519)

By professionalism Wallace means treating writing like a chosen and valued career, working every day with a sense of dedicated discipline. Wallace kept charts of his daily progress from the time he wrote his first (and unpublished) novel at age nineteen.

Some beginning writers evidence periods of conscious intent. One of the students in Reed Larson's case studies, S.N., described regular times each day when he worked on his term paper project. He set up goals for the amount he planned to accomplish each session. He was, though, flexible enough to allow his research and writing to take him in directions he hadn't planned. And when he knew the session was going to be a difficult one, he

decided in advance to make it shorter to avoid being overwhelmed. Of course, S.N. was working with a deadline in mind, but he wasn't deadline driven. He worked ahead at a pace that was comfortable, and even sometimes pleasurable, not waiting to begin writing until his deadline to put him into a stage of anxiety (34-35).

3. Creative Flow--E.B. White writes: "He [the writer] is like a surfer--he bides his time. Waits for the perfect wave on which to ride in" (qtd. in Murray 219-20). The surfer gauges the waves not by sitting idle in a beach chair but by immersing himself and his surfboard in the building turbulence of the waves. The writer isn't idle either. He is researching, planning, sensing, and thinking as he bides his time, waiting for a flash of insight. Carol McCabe, a journalist, explains:

> The time just before I begin to write is the most important time I spend on a piece. By now the piece is there, waiting inside the notebook, tape or transcripts, clip files and photos, like a sculpture, waiting for release from a block of limestone. I just have to figure out how to get it out of there. (qtd. in Murray 220)

How many writers "get it out of there" is through a flow-like process in which they make intuitive connections forming patterns in the data they have absorbed. McCabe submerges herself in a total focus on her writing, listening to her internal voices. Later, she can revise and edit. But during creative flow

she trusts her preparation, trusts her writing process, and she lets the writing happen.

Reed Larson's case study, S.N. (discussed above) reported sessions of working on his term paper in which he experienced intense, flow-like involvement: "I was really shut off from everything that was happening. My phone rang, and it took me three rings to realize it; I mean I was really engrossed" (35). Larson points out that S.N. had no more writing experience than other students in his study; in fact, his basic abilities as a writer were no greater. What was different was S.N.'s "internal regulation and his ability to create enjoyment allowing him the patience and command of thought to lay out his materials in such a deliberate and compelling fashion" (38). S.N. also seemed to have the ability to begin writing with conscious intent but to involve himself in the experience until it was flow-like and deeply pleasurable for him.

Why is the Writing Threshold Important?

Teachers facing rooms full of twenty-five freshmen on the brink of writing their first college compositions may find it comforting to assume that all students will respond as we did to writing instruction and that all students will respond in the same way. We can teach them methods we have ourselves found effective: freewriting, revising, etc. According to George H. Jensen and John K. DiTiberio, though, we will be lucky if any one process we teach works for some of our students. It will, they

say, not work for others, for it will force them to write in a way that will fail to draw upon the students' strengths as individuals. Or, if we realize that all students don't respond in the same way, we may teach a variety of approaches. Unfortunately, some students will be further confused by open-ended variety. The third alternative, according to Jensen and DiTiberio, is to "develop an understanding of how people differ and how these differences affect the writing process. We can then more effectively individualize writing instruction" (286).

My contention is that the term "writing threshold" has utility in the classroom; defining the writing threshold gives identity to a critically individual but largely ignored part of the writing process. Along with studying pre-writing, revision and other writing processes, it may be useful for teachers to identify for students the different precipitating states for crossing the writing threshold. If we can help our students realize there are different ways to cross the writing threshold, we will help them de-mystify the process of putting words on paper.

I will use as an illustration Andy, one of my students in freshman composition. In a diagnostic essay Andy explains he dreads the process of composition so much that he procrastinates until the last possible moment before beginning an assigned essay:

> When I learned that this class was all writing, I almost died because I knew I had to take it

> in order to graduate. Like in high school, I'll probably write down in my calendar the due date for each assignment and avoid thinking about it till the night before.

Clearly, Andy uses an extreme version of deadline anxiety as his precipitating state for crossing the writing threshold. He may not realize it yet, but this pattern likely will cause him problems in college because he isn't allowing himself enough time for writing. Likely, Andy won't attempt to change his pattern of crossing the threshold until fear of failure drives him to request assistance.

Susan, another student, writes that she doesn't begin all her writing in the same way:

> When something really great has happened in my life, I like to sit down and write about it to a friend. The words flow easily, and it's fun. When I write an assignment, though, I just have to make myself do it. I get in a quiet place without any distractions, like my room at night, and I write until I have a rough draft. Then I put it away for awhile before I try rewriting.

Susan's words flow easily and pleasurably in the letter to a friend, a state which can be identified as creative flow. In writing an essay, in contrast, she doesn't feel that same ease. Instead, she makes conscious plans for writing that she knows will accomplish her purpose. Susan's method of crossing the writing threshold for essay writing is certainly more functional

than Andy's. She plans a time to write each draft and doesn't stop until it is completed. Apparently, though, she hasn't yet considered seeking the kind of creative flow in her essay writing that she experiences in letter writing. Perhaps the essay writing doesn't flow because she doesn't have a clearly perceived audience as she does for her letter writing. Or perhaps she hasn't yet found essay topics of sufficient interest to inspire a state of creative flow.

Many students believe that there is something inexplicably wrong about the way they produce text. If their ways weren't wrong, they think, why is it frequently so painful and so difficult to write? Suppose students, through considering the writing threshold, become aware that all writers experience times when writing is difficult, times when they procrastinate, times when they have to force themselves to write, and times when, sometimes unexpectedly, the writing comes easily. Suppose students come to realize that their procrastinations, their fears, and their joys are normal reactions to the process of putting words on paper. Suppose students learn that it is possible to alter the ways that they cross the writing process?

Alan, another of my students, offers an answer to these questions as he describes his thoughts after becoming more aware of the writing process of professional writers and of his fellow students:

> Before, I had this image of professional writers sitting at computers and smiling ear to ear, not a

> bit anxious or worried. After reading some authors' essays about writing, I have begun to see that they have the same feelings of anxiety and pain that I do. As my deadline gets closer, I start to get more and more stressed. When I get to the point that I can't sleep, I know it's time to begin writing. Just knowing that other writers do the same thing is comforting . . . Maybe as I write more, I'll be able to write before I get so uncomfortable; but if that doesn't happen, I'm not alone. Other writers have the same problem.

Not feeling alone in the writing process, not fearing it quite so much, and perhaps even daring to modify it in positive ways--students experience these results after identifying the writing threshold and the ways it is crossed.

We writers are all, in a sense, alone when we face that blank sheet of paper. But, in another sense, we share a common task, that of putting words in a row on that blank page. Identifying and teaching the term "writing threshold" may help make that moment of text production less mysterious, more approachable for students and, perhaps, even for us, as writers.

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